

Oral History Interviews, Reunion Weekend 2009

**Interview with Margery Lott Abrams, class of 1947 and
Barbara Newman Olson, class of 1947**

Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow

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Interview #1 for June 19, 2009

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[Start: 00:00:00]

Today is June 19th, 2009, Reunion Weekend, conducting oral history interviews with alumni in the Archives. Could each of you please state your name?

M: I'm Midge Abrams, the class of 1947.

B: I'm Barbara Newman Olson, the class of 1947, they called me Bo.

And what did each of you get your degrees in?

M: Anthropology.

B: I have a degree in Psychology, Professor Griffiths was responsible for that, and also architectural history, taught by the gentleman that designed Wriston Art Center.

Charles Brooks?

B: Charles Brooks.

And how did each of you choose to decide to attend Lawrence?

M: Well, you may not want to hear this. My father and mother are from the East. My father thought I should go to one of the Seven Sisters. And I would have none of it. This was during the war, anyways. So we had a thing like, it was too far to go and come back, and transportation for holidays and such. So that kind of cut that down. And I absolutely refused. And that was the first time I ever defied my father. Fortunately for me the two girls across the street, the Rice sisters, at least one of them had gone to Lawrence, I think the other one went for one year or two years, but Barbara graduated from here. My father liked the Rice family, they were a good family, if it was good enough for the Rices, it was good enough for me. So this is how I came to Lawrence.

And you?

B: Well, although I am a native of San Francisco, I went to boarding school at Milwaukee-Downer Seminary in Milwaukee. And my roommate was Nancy Seaborne, who, her family had been longtime residents of Appleton. And after the first few days

when we got to get used to each other, we became best friends. We graduated from Milwaukee-Downer, she came to Lawrence, I returned home to California, and started UCLA. In our correspondence which we kept up, she said, "You know, you really have to come to Lawrence." And I finally decided I should come to Lawrence.

Did you come at the end of your freshman year from UCLA?

B: Only spent one semester at UCLA and that was it.

And what dorms did you live in while you were here at Lawrence?

M: I lived in Peabody House, and it was quite an experience. I'm glad I did. We had a good time, the house was falling down, but it was a close-knit group. I can't remember how many people were there, but you got to know the people in your house pretty well. And after the first year, we moved over to Russell Sage.

And with Peabody House, how many women usually lived in that house?

M: I don't know, 15, 20, something like that. And my first roommate, Elaine Johnson and I have remained friends since then, and we remain friends now.

And in terms of it falling down, was it falling down with the exterior?

M: No, it was old and creaky, the stairs creaked, and the draft through the windows was pretty bad. We stuffed towels in there to keep the storms out and stuff like that. We roughed it a little bit, and the plumbing was a little iffy. But we enjoyed it, I'm glad I lived there, we had a good time. We all did, we all got along fine.

B: It was a good intro.

M: Yes, it was.

And then you moved to Sage Hall, which was a newer facility.

M: Right, I lived there afterwards, until graduation.

And you?

B: When I came to Lawrence as a freshman in the spring of 1944, I lived in Sage. Because of the war, we went to school all through the year, there were 3 semesters. I can remember one semester, I guess Midge, you had gone to Illinois.

M: Yes, I was taking my sabbatical.

B: We lived in the Beta house, that was sort of fun, then we returned, there were about 10 us, we lived on the second floor of Sage in the front, so we could see what was going on

at all times. And we became known as the "bad pennies" by Miss Wiegand who was housemother.

M: She lived downstairs.

B: Yes, she lived downstairs. And she could...

M: Bang on the wall, or bang on the pipes.

B: Well, actually no, she could monitor our behavior quite closely.

[00:05:26]

And why were you called the bad pennies?

M: Because we always turned up at reunions, and here we are again! If she were alive, she'd have a stroke!

B: She called us the bad pennies. I guess it was because we sort of, we did our own thing, which really wasn't very gross.

M: We were not bad people.

B: We weren't bad people, we just sort of didn't conform with her ideas at that time, although we weren't threatened with being expelled.

M: No, she just disapproved of our boisterous behavior, that was it.

B: And our boyfriends, probably.

Now what kind of rules were there for the women living in the dorms? Did you have to be in at a certain hour?

B: Yes, yes we did. We had to be in at eleven o'clock as I recall, wasn't it?

M: Was it eleven or ten? I don't remember.

B: Well, anyway, we knew we had to be in, because the light over the front door would flicker on and off, and that was the signal. Cut it off, no more smooching, which went on out in front.

The entrance of the dormitory was where your dates would come and meet you, they couldn't go any farther?

M: They could come in. We had a living room in Sage.

B: Yes, all it had was a piano. We didn't have TV, of course TV wasn't around in those days, nor cell phones, nor computers. Our social life was around that piano.

What organizations were you a part of when you were here? Were you part of a sorority or other groups?

M: Yes, we were both Thetas. And I think there was a Spanish club which I joined, and what else?

B: I was a member of the French Club. We weren't a bunch of joiners, and there weren't an awful lot of clubs. There weren't a lot of groups and such. We stayed pretty much on campus, because of course cars were not allowed, students were not permitted to have cars in those days, which was okay. We could walk downtown, we went to Conkey's Bookstore and the music store, the movies, and Pettibone-Peabody was the big department store in town, downtown Appleton of course was very active in those days. And what was the name of the bar we used to go to?

M: Which one?

B: The one closest to campus.

M: Jack's? Bill's?

B: Yes, Bill's.

What were some activities that you did in your sorority, the Thetas, like fundraisers or dances?

B: I can't remember a fundraiser, can you?

M: I don't think we were raising money.

B: I don't think we were. It was rather a casual arrangement. I remember that when we were practicing for our initiation, I think a couple of us laughed...

M: No, what we did was, this was after we were initiated, you don't remember that, but I will never forget it. We were boisterous then, during the initiation which was supposed to be a solemn, never forgotten event. And we got a little giggly and the next time there was an initiation, Barbara and I sat out in the hall and played the music.

B: Oh, that's right.

M: We weren't allowed in the room to participate, so we sat out, we were safe out there I guess. They were safe from us.

B: We had more fun.

M: Yeah, right.

B: Activities, well, I don't know.

M: Well since there were only eleven men on campus at that time, there was not a whole lot of socializing between boys and girls until the Navy came. So the first years were kind of...

B: I don't know what we did. We played bridge. We played party bridge I mean, a lot of kicking under the table kind of thing.

M: There was a bridge game going on all the time, and if you had a class and you were playing bridge, you put your hand down and went to class and somebody came and picked up your hand and kept on going with whoever was there to play.

[00:10:19]

When the Navy V-12 unit arrived and they were living in Brokaw, was there a lot of socializing?

M: Oh boy, was there! Yes, there was a lot of it.

B: I would say that a number of the girls ended up marrying the fellas that were in the V-12, and still are married to them. The ones that are still alive.

M: There's Roxy and Dan, and Stretch and Johnny, and Gladys and Jerry. That's three out of our group of eight or nine.

B: Ten.

M: And maybe more that we can't think of. That's when things picked up around here, it was more interesting.

And when there were dances you had men to go with, right?

M: Yes, we didn't have any dances when the men weren't here.

B: The dances were always held over across, in...

M: In the gym.

B: Alexander Gym. All the way over there. And very often we never got to the dances.

M: Stop off some place instead.

B: Stop off some place and stay there, it was easier than going over there.

What were some traditions at Lawrence while you were here, like the ROCK or the rivalry with Ripon?

B: May Day was the big deal then because they crowned a May Queen.

M: Oh, that's right, I forgot about that.

B: You remember, Nancy Seaborne was May Queen one year. Well, we had, what was the name of that dog?

M: Maxie.

B: Maxie, a spaniel who has probably been talked about before.

M: He was the campus dog. He belonged to somebody, he wasn't lost, he had a good deal there. I don't know because we didn't have serenades until the men came, things like that.

B: One of the things probably not in this same vein, but I wish that students of today could see the Union that we had.

I was going to ask you about Hamar Union.

B: Oh yes, we had Hamar Union which was an old residence, which had been the Hamar residence, I assume. It was just...three or four tables or something.

M: It was a two-story house, but we were only downstairs. And there was a window where the cook stood behind the window and you gave your order. It's the first place and only place in my whole life where grilled peanut butter sandwiches were one of the delicacies of the house. And I love them to this day, and I have never had them any place else, I make them myself at home.

B: It was very simple food. They had wonderful quesadillas.

M: Cheeseburgers and grilled cheese and whatever.

B: We would go over after our eight o'clock or nine o'clock class.

M: Yes, but it was pretty small.

Was there a room where you could play music?

M: No, just tables and chairs.

B: A lot of socializing and that was it.

[00:14:06]

I was going to ask, who were some of the teachers that you had while you were here that really influenced you and really made a difference?

M: Well, all the girls had a crush on Mr. Read who was the geology professor, he was cute. I took geology.

B: And your roommate Marilyn baby-sat for him, didn't she?

M: No, I baby-sat for Dr. Rowe, when they had Quonset huts set around the lawn and around Peabody. Their site has long been disturbed by other stuff. Chandler Rowe was my main professor, he was the anthropology professor, and I became a baby-sitter for his three children at night. And their house was very interesting in the Quonset hut. He had masks on the walls from all the South Pacific islanders and so on, and I don't know if this will go in the Archives or not, one night I went over to baby-sit, and Bill was the second child, ChiChi, Cynthia, was the first little girl, she was about five and Bill was about two or three or something, and I think they had a baby after that.

But anyway, I went over there one night and there was much exhilaration over there. I said, "What's going on?" and they said, "Bill is toilet-trained." Well, that was a big thrill. I said, "Really." And they said, "Well, sort of, he's bathtub trained." They drew a circle in the bathtub and he could pee into the bathtub, and that was progress. Anyway, long after that, thirty years maybe, my husband and I had a chance to go to Hawaii, and he had been the president of a college in Hawaii, and I went and visited him and his wife while we were on our trip over there. We had a good time, it was nice to see them.

B: When he left Lawrence, he went over there?

M: Yes. Well, that was his field, mostly the South Pacific, that's just where his anthropology interests lay. But anyway, I kept up with him afterward.

B: Stephen Foster Darling was our chemistry professor, he was just a great guy and of course it was during the war, and beauty products weren't awfully easy to acquire. But he used to make, in those days they called it cold cream which was a cleansing cream, he made that for us. And also lipsticks.

M: And Prell shampoo.

B: What did he do with that?

M: He made it. Mary Bosworth came home and it was where you could drop a pearl down and it would go slowly to the bottom, he made that, too.

B: Anyway, he was awfully good with us. I am trying to think of my Shakespeare professor, a woman. She was so wonderful because she'd really get into the act.

It wasn't Anne Jones, was it?

B: No, she was the French teacher, my French teacher. Now, there was another, I should have looked that up before I came, I can't think of who it was.

M: We had a Spanish teacher, Federico [José] de Onis. I had had two years of Spanish when I came, so I took more, and I ended up with five years of Spanish. I'm so glad I did because I have all these Spanish people to deal with in Chicago. I can pretty much know what they're talking about. Anyway, he was a little thin man and in the first days we sat in the front seats so we could appear to be eager students. It turns out that in his declamation of all of these sentences he would spit, and spit would go out. So we moved our seats to the back and we weren't going to be front row students after that. We sat back a little farther.

You had talked some about the huts, and I was wondering, were they here when you started at Lawrence?

B: The Quonset huts? Well, let's see, we started in 1943, so I can't recall if they were. I think they were just 1944 and 1945. They were for returning vets that lived in them. They weren't used as classrooms.

M: The Rows lived in one. But some of the veterans were married, and so they couldn't stay in the dorms. But I don't remember how many there were, but there weren't a whole bunch, maybe four, five, or six huts, something like that.

B: The president lived on campus in those days, and it was a beautiful house. I can't recall if they tore it down.

No, it's Sampson House.

B: Yes, that's the one that the president uses as an office now? Anyway, we used to have special parties there, which was always sort of a treat. I mean certainly smaller groups, but you know, special occasions.

[00:19:55]

So you would just go and visit with the president and his family, Nathan Pusey was president?

M: He was, well not initially, I can't remember, who was president when we came? He was a good-looking guy.

B: I think they had an interim. They had someone taking the president's place.

M: I don't know who was here in 1942.

B: I don't remember either. Marshall Hulbert was here, then Dean DuShane was it? Donald DuShane was the Dean of Men, Charlotte Wollaeger was the Dean of Women.

M: Oh, bless her heart.

B: Yes, she was a very nice person.

I was wondering, the war was going on when you started here at Lawrence, and how much did you know about what was going on, were there a lot of newspapers that were coming to campus?

M: Yes, we got all the news. In fact, a number of the gals had boyfriends before they came to school who ended up coming to Lawrence to get their training as part of the V-12. I remember V-E Day, there was a kid with newspapers just like the old time newspaper guy, coming down the street, he was yelling about the Allies have invaded France. And he was yelling and we leaned out the window and we said, "What?" and he told us. And we went down and bought a newspaper. We got pretty much stuff.

B: We were really rather isolated as far as the war was concerned. My family living on the West coast of course they had the submarine scare and they had blackouts and so forth. We were talking last night about ration coupons, and should we tell it?

M: Well, I don't think they can get anybody in trouble now.

B: Well, anyway, we had to all bring our ration coupons to school. I don't recall that we ever lacked for anything.

M: We had meat every day, on the table. And they did not spend the ration points, because when we went home for Thanksgiving they gave us our ration points to take home, and my mother grabbed them eagerly and ran down and bought a turkey or something. And I would compare Lawrence's everything with my other friends who had gone off to the University of Illinois and places like that, and they had macaroni and cheese three nights a week, and here I was having meat and there did not seem to be lack of anything in Wisconsin during the war, food-wise.

B: Only shoes.

M: Yeah, I guess.

And did you have your meals, was there a dining hall in Sage?

B: Yes, absolutely, and my roommate helped support herself through school by waiting on tables, which some of the students did as part of their tuition and cost of living. No cooking in the rooms, no beautiful kitchen, no freezer facilities.

M: In fact if you had a hot plate, which a lot of people did, including me, it would blow a fuse and everyone would know what you were doing, so you couldn't do that anymore. We didn't have any food stamps or stuff like that. We didn't cook.

B: We didn't have a lot of food in the room either. It just wasn't, you know. And it was not co-ed.

M: In fact, if a man came to do something, like a repairman, or even if a father was coming upstairs to help his daughter to get her suitcases to go home, they would yell, "Man on second!" Everybody run and hide or close your doors.

B: That was 62 years ago.

M: I know that. "Man on second!"

Physical education classes, were those gender separate?

B: Oh yes, they were. We played lacrosse down where the tennis courts are, there were no tennis courts down there. We played volleyball.

M: We played baseball.

B: Where'd you play baseball?

M: Well, the Thetas were part of a team because I was the second baseman.

B: You must have had to go across the river.

M: No, we didn't. I don't know where we went.

Would it have been the lawn in front of Main Hall?

B: No, we never could play out there. That was taboo.

M: I don't know where it was.

B: You might have played that on a lacrosse field.

[00:25:00]

Were there Convocations held?

M: Oh yes, absolutely, everyone had to go to Convocation, every Thursday at eleven o'clock.

Do you remember some of the speakers who were there?

B: Wendell Willkie came at one point. Joe McCarthy, didn't he come and speak? I think he did.

M: We saw him in Milwaukee. He came and walked around the table.

B: I do remember Wendell Willkie coming.

M: We had some very good speakers.

B: Although the thought of having to go was what made Convocations such a bother.

And it was held in the Chapel?

B: It was held in the Chapel, oh yes.

And then, what do you remember about your Commencement?

M: Very little.

B: I remember it was wonderful, it really was, of course we marched the academic procession.

And it was held in the Chapel?

B: Oh yes, in the Chapel or outside if it was good weather.

M: We all marched down two by two up to the front.

B: I don't remember too much, but a couple of our classmates were getting married right after. It was almost more exciting than graduating.

M: I was trying to think who was our Commencement speaker, and I know his name. He was in the government.

B: Was he the guy that was in the Tennessee Valley Authority?

M: I think it was Gordon Clapp. I'll be darned, wherever that came from, I don't know. I surprised myself.

As you come back to Lawrence as alums for different reunions, what are some things, of course Lawrence has changed, how has Lawrence changed and maybe how has it stayed the same throughout the years since you were a student here?

M: Of course there's a million buildings now.

B: Well, the physical change of course, the buildings. We liked all of them I think except the architecture of Wriston. Returning, I don't know, the people haven't changed.

M: No, it's still the same nifty place it was.

Does Main Hall look different, like the interior?

M: No, it looks pretty much the same to me. Maybe a coat of paint or something, but otherwise it's quite beautiful and familiar. And they have ruined Russell Sage Hall of course, the interior. It had a beautiful staircase going upstairs in the hall, and that's gone of course. Now it's got this elevator thing. It's unfriendly and then it was really neat, it was nice. It was like your own house.

B: It was more a community kind of, there were wide hallways, it was quite spacious. I think they've cut it up so that it's reminded us of the first time we went in after they started co-ed occupation of a penal institution.

M: It has no personality now.

B: But the exterior still looks the same as it did.

Well, is there anything that we didn't cover that you can think of?

B: You have good questions! You really know how to sort of get people going.

M: How long have you been doing this?

This is my third, no my fourth reunion to be doing this.

M: I've always been glad that when I went to Lawrence, although I had no idea what it was like when I came. In those days, as far as I know, people didn't go around interviewing colleges before their kids went there.

B: No they didn't, of course because the objective was when you graduated was to get married, so that was also part of college.

M: Well, right but as far as looking over the physical plant and saying, "Oh, I don't like those buildings," so you don't go there because you don't like that, parents are driving their children all over the country for interviews.

B: Now it's a big difference.

M: We had none of that, when they dropped me off here, none of us had ever seen it before, my parents dumped my suitcases off, said good-bye and went home. I just like it, I'm just glad I went here. I have met several people since I moved to the retirement community in Naperville. One gal, when I said I was coming up for our reunion two

years ago or three years ago, I said something about Appleton, Wisconsin. She said, "You're going to Appleton?" and I said yes, and she said, "Lawrence, oh, I went there for a year until we moved away and I had to get out and go someplace else." One of my best friends at church said, "I went to Lawrence for one year, too" and then she went to Drake for some reason. These little things pop up all over. You never know when you're going to find somebody.

I'll go ahead and turn off the recorder then.

[End: 00:30:29]